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AUTHOR Matalene, Carolyn B.
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ABSTRACT

Analogies between the reading and writing processes can be drawn from a method of teaching literature that is based on Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading. The prime responsibilities of teachers of literature are to allow students the right to experience the text for themselves, arriving at their own interpretations, and to make students conscious of the process of reading literature. This process involves the same cognitive operations that are performed in the writing process: collecting material, questioning material, establishing internal connections, discovering emotional responses, revising, and evaluating. Teaching reading and writing as congruent processes can make the achievement of both mutually reinforcing. (AEA)

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# TEACHING THE READING PROCESS

Although as English teachers we are by now quite comfortable with the "literacy crisis" and have learned to stop dismissing it as a media event and to start using it for increased funding, more required courses, and additional positions, we are less comfortable, I believe, with the "literature crisis." By the literature crisis, I refer to the fact that our students not only do not like to read, but also that they often actively detest reading those works which we consider great. After they endure the required courses, they seldom choose to take another literature course for the fun of it, for their own pleasure, or for the intellectual stimulation. On many campuses, vocabulary courses draw more students than courses in contemporary fiction, and the number of sections of Shakespeare offered has dwindled from as many as twenty-five to perhaps two. Many reasons may be cited as to why our students are no longer willing to enter the world of Tom Jones or Vanity Fair or to lose themselves in War and Peace, but whatever the complex reasons for their resistance to difficult works, we must be sure that we do not increase or solidify that resistance. (To do so is to destroy our calling and our profession from within.)

Teaching literature is of course very difficult. We seldom know what we are doing or why we are doing it (unlike teaching writing), and we seldom stop to ask. But if we ask former students--students who have been out of school for several years and who, of course, studied with other teachers at other institutions--how they now feel about the literature courses that they took, we usually discover that if they have not been

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absolutely turned off, they have been left puzzled and defeated. They remember that Faulkner was terribly deep and not about what they thought it was about, that D.H. Lawrence was so symbolic that the teacher had to explain what it all meant, and generally that only English teachers can understand that stuff or would want to bother. They sometimes retain a nostalgic awe for an especially abstruse instructor, nostalgic because they believe that reading literature can occur only in a course and with professional guidance.

And thus do we increase our students' resistance to literature by presenting it as difficult, esoteric, and available only to Ph.D. candidates and by parading our knowledge, our scholarship, and our special interests at the expense of our students. The all-too-frequent scenario in a literature class for inexperienced readers is that students are told to read a particular work and at the next class meeting, during class discussion, they are gradually made to realize that their reading was superficial, wrong-headed, and incompetent. (Few of us would willingly subject ourselves to such denigration--especially when it can easily be avoided by never taking another literature course.) Or, students are assured that in their papers they may advance any reading of the text they care to so long as they defend it, only to discover that, as usual, the only defensible reading happens to be the teacher's. In our reverence for the text and in our insistance on our own cherished "right readings" of the world's great literature, the only goal we usually achieve is that our students will never try any of it again. And surely our real goal is that someday in some drugstore some student of ours will

buy Madame Bovary instead of Sweet Savage Sin.

If we would get that student to buy the great work instead of the pulp and if we would deal with the "literature crisis," then we must refocus our attention--as the topic of this session indicates--from Madame Bovary as an object, a concatenation of words to be mastered, to the subject, the student who is trying to respond to them. Louise Rosenblatt in her recent work, The Reader, The Text, The Poem, reminds us of the importance of the reader. She presents a transactional (rather than a subjective) theory of literature based on the premise "that a text, once it leaves its author's hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes it from a literary work." Each reader's "evocation" of the poem is unique, and although guided by the text, is also affected by the reader's past experiences, present interests, historical location, and personal associations with the language. "What each reader makes of the text is, indeed, for him the poem, in the sense that this is his only direct perception of it. No one else can read it for him. He may learn indirectly about other's experiences with the text; he may come to see that his own was confused or impoverished, and he may then be stimulated to call forth from the text a better poem, but this he must do for himself, and only what he experiences in relation to the text is--again let us underline--for him, the work."[1]

Our primary responsibility as teachers of literature is then to allow for and to insist upon our students' making sense of the text, evoking their own readings, rather than copying down ours. We must try to encourage, enrich, and build upon cur students' responses, however

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[1]Louise M. Rosenblatt, The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale, 1978), pp. ix, 105, and passim.

inept or limited they might be initially, and we must try to avoid telling students what the work "means," according to our reading from the night before or from the last article we have read. To allow for student reactions and responses need not mean throwing rich readings to the winds (twenty-five readings might well be richer than one) and does not mean anything goes. There are parameters of appropriate responses indicated by the text itself. But allowing students the right to experience the text for themselves does mean that we not insist on single "right readings," that we not impose our own specialized interests on our students, and that we not encapsulate the work as cut off from human experience, from our students' experience of their world.

The real point of reading literature is, after all, to enrich one's fund of experience, and the real joy of reading literature is in the actual experience of the work for oneself. Perhaps the best way to encourage and enrich students' responses to literature is to make them more conscious of the actual process of reading literature. Reading literature, as we all know, is different from reading a textbook or a newspaper; reading literature requires much more of us. We must make the connections ourselves, organize and reorganize the pieces of information given, interpret and reinterpret the meaning of the events. We must respond actively and creatively. We must, in fact, perform all of the cognitive operations which we perform when we write. Applying the well-known model of the writing process to the reading process and informing students of the necessary intellectual stages involved in evoking a poem or a story from a text seems to me the best way to analyze, to teach, and to encourage the complex activity of reading well.

The process of writing involves constructing by oneself a coherent network of language appropriate to one's audience and purpose. The process of reading involves constructing for oneself from the text a work of art appropriate to the author's implied purpose and to the reader's subjective responses. Both acts occur in time and both require questioning and connecting, organizing, and revising. As students approach a writing task, we tell them that they must first invest time in invention because writing can only occur after a period of mental gestation. We insist that they collect material and then ask questions and establish connections; they must also make decisions about purpose and audience. As students approach a reading assignment, they must perform the same operations, collecting the material of the text in their minds, questioning that material and establishing internal connections. They must also make tentative decisions about the author's purpose and about their own responses. As students begin to compose, we ask them to think about organization and form and about what arrangement of the material will best suit their audience and purpose. The reader, in evoking the poem or story or play, must also organize, structure, and form the material of the text into a coherent whole. (And anyone who has read much literary criticism knows how many different unifying principles can be discovered in the same work by inventive readers.)

We tell our students that when they have reached the composing stage of the writing process, they are ready to begin a "discovery" draft, to use Don Murray's term. As they struggle to find meaning in language, they also discover what they really think what they really want to say.

The process of reading should involve the same sense of discovery, a discovery of emotional responses. Both writing and reading, if carried out seriously and actively, are acts of self discovery. Both acts require us to engage with language, to bring together the private world of our own language, rich with associations garnered through personal experience, and the public world of shared language, the actual words of the text and the language conventions of our readers. And both acts are guided by our developing sense of purpose based upon a particular text. When we read, we construct and reconstruct our sense of the author's purpose from the actual text; when we write, we draft and revise as we try to approach and achieve the ideal text which exists in our mind's eye.

Teaching students to revise their own writing is, as we all know, our primary task as writing teachers. Learning to write means learning to revise. And encouraging our students to revise their reading of the text, both as they read and as they reread, should be our primary goal as literature teachers. That teachers of literature reread works of literature two or three or even eleven times is as obviously delightful to us as it is bizarre and perverse to our students; we can share with them our process of "revising" the work, of reinterpreting and reevaluating it.

When the final draft of a writing assignment is turned in, we often ask our students to evaluate their work or the work of their classmates and to decide on the effectiveness of the writing in fulfilling a particular purpose for a given audience. After students are satisfied

with their interpretations of a work of art, we can ask them to evaluate the experience of evoking the work which they have just completed. For what sort of reader and at what point in historical and personal time would the experience of this work be valuable? If our young women students decide that Cordelia's responses are mean and obstinate and if our young men students decide that Hamlet's hatred for Claudius is admirable, who is to say that they are wrong? Shouldn't we rather unravel the reasons--personal and social and cultural--for their feelings? If their responses to great works are sometimes naive and shallow isn't this less important than that their responses be their own and that their experiences with literature be positive and rewarding, not negative and defeating?

Teaching reading and writing as congruent processes can make the gradual achievement of these two difficult skills mutually reinforcing. And for those of us who are asked to teach literature and compositon together, the content of the reading process can become the subject matter of the writing process.

Because of the publicity surrounding the "literacy crisis," our students now know that learning to write is difficult, but that writing skills are both necessary and valued in our culture. And some of our students have discovered that writing for the sake of writing affords unexpected pleasures. Our future as literature teachers will depend upon our success in making the same case for literature. Learning to read well is difficult, but also exciting and enjoyable, and the skills mastered in responding actively and creatively to a work of art are not only transferable to one's work, but also a very index to the richness of one's life.